

VIDEO

FAQ

Q How can I play multi-region DVDs on my PC?

A Most DVD movies you buy are region coded so can be played only on a DVD player that has the same region code. The same system is built into the firmware of most modern PC DVD drives, which will allow you to change the region up to five times before locking to a single region. If you legally import DVDs from other countries, this is very frustrating.

One way around region coding is to update the firmware on your drive. Region-free firmware is available for many drives, but it can be a pain to install and any mistakes could render your drive useless. If you're fairly technically adept, see <http://forum.rpc1.org/portal.php> for more details.

If that looks complicated, you can use software that bypasses region encoding. DVD Region+CSS Free will let you play any disc on almost any DVD drive. For more details and a 90-day free trial, go to www.dvdidle.com.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

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CANON HR10

★★★★★

£653 inc VAT

From www.pixmania.co.uk

Our favourite HD camcorder, Canon's HV20 (see 'Also consider...', below), uses MiniDV tapes. This means that to edit the footage, you'll have to copy it in real time to a PC, which can be time consuming. What's more, playing video from the camcorder to a HD television requires winding the tape to the correct segment. This feels old-fashioned, so we were pleased to see that the new HR10 records to DVDs.

Standard-definition (SD) DVD camcorders have been popular in the past couple of years. Video is recorded to 8cm DVDs, which you can put straight into your PC's DVD drive, then drag and drop the video files from it. Better still, you can play the discs on most standard DVD players.

However, the HD video from the HR10 requires a player that's compatible with advanced video codec high definition (AVCHD). Blu-ray players such as the PlayStation 3 can play this format, but they cost around £300. This probably rules out shooting some quick footage and playing it back immediately at a friend's house. Each DVD holds only 15 minutes of video at the highest quality setting, so you'll need a lot of them to shoot long movies.

In other ways, however, the HR10 is very similar to the HV20. It uses the same lens, and behind it is an identical 2.96-megapixel CMOS sensor. Like the HV20, it also supports progressive-scan recording, which gives a more cinematic feel to your video.

Despite these similarities, the end result isn't identical, as different video compression formats are used. The HV20 uses

the MPEG2-based HDV format with a maximum bit rate of 25Mbit/s. The HR10 uses the more efficient H.264 based AVCHD format, though only at a maximum of 12Mbit/s, and this can cause problems.

Image quality is great if you're shooting landscapes from a tripod. However, the lower bit rate means that busy scenes and quick camera motions introduce compression issues that reduce the amount of detail in the final video. This means it can't match the image quality of the HV20 across a wide range of subjects.

The HR10 does have superior build quality. While the HV20 feels a little cheap in places, the HR10 is

more sturdy and compact. It fits well in your hand and the controls are all thoughtfully positioned. The battery lasted for well over an hour and a half.

The HR10 is a well-designed camcorder that shoots good-quality HD video in most situations. If you are looking for convenience and already own a Blu-ray player, it could be ideal. Despite the inconveniences of tape, though, we prefer the HV20 because of the generally higher quality of its resulting video.

Seth Barton



SUMMARY

- ✓ Compact and sturdy feeling
- ✓ Convenient DVD format
- ✗ HD playback requires a Blu-ray player

HD CAMCORDER DVD-R/-RW/-R DL and Mini-SD storage, 10x optical zoom, 1/2.7in 2.96-megapixel CMOS, 2.7in LCD screen, HDMI, component, composite and phono output, USB Hi-Speed interface
PART CODE 2076B006AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk

PERFORMANCE (see page 66)

Battery life **97m**

Also consider...

TERRATEC Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity

★★★★★

£64 inc VAT

From www.pixmania.co.uk



This USB TV tuner has a diversity mode that takes a signal from two tuners and aerials to improve reception in areas with weak signal strength. Alternatively, you can use the tuners independently to receive one programme while recording another.

The included software is easy to use, image quality is good, and the remote control is clearly labelled. The USB XS Diversity is the best dual tuner we've seen.

USB TV TUNER USB2 interface, dual digital tuners, 2x RF inputs
PART CODE 10456 DETAILS <http://uk.terratec.net> ✓ Twin tuners with diversity; can schedule two recordings at once ✗ No timeline EPG
FULL REVIEW Apr 2007



CANON HV20

★★★★★

£598 inc VAT

From www.amazon.co.uk

PRICE CUT!



The HV20 is our favourite high-definition camcorder. It's affordable, but it doesn't sacrifice video quality and supports exciting new features such as progressive scan. You'll get excellent-quality footage in almost any situation.

It's easy for beginners to use and has enough manual controls to capture the best images in trickier conditions. The HV20 stores its video footage to old-fashioned MiniDV tapes, but don't let that put you off this truly excellent camcorder.

HD CAMCORDER MiniDV storage, 10x optical zoom, 1/2.7in 2.96-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, HDMI, component, composite and phono outputs, USB2 and FireWire interfaces
PART CODE 2060B006AA
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
✓ Excellent picture quality; good battery life ✗ Poor zoom control
FULL REVIEW Oct 2007

Battery life **95m**

SLING MEDIA Slingbox Pro

★★★★★

£180 inc VAT

From www.morecomputers.co.uk

Until you've seen a Slingbox in action, it's hard to believe what it can do. The new Slingbox Pro, just like the original Slingbox Classic (see 'Also consider...', below) allows you to watch your home television or set-top box wherever you are in the world. All you need is a broadband internet connection and a Windows-based computer.

The Slingbox Pro is similar to the Classic, but it has a more understated case. Realising that most Slingbox Classics were being used to stream video around users' houses rather than across the internet, Slingmedia has uprated the Pro so it can stream at 8Mbit/s. This leads to perceptibly better quality than the Classic's 2.5Mbit/s streaming, although we found that the full 8Mbit/s was used only when we were streaming HD video from Blu-ray or HD-DVD players.

Most broadband connections have a limited upload speed, though, and that hinders the quality of the video that the Slingbox can stream over the internet. Fortunately, you can get away with around 256Kbit/s.

On the rear are three video inputs: S-video, composite, and what appears to be an HDMI interface. Sadly, the latter is actually a proprietary component video interface. The included cable has two sets of connectors: one for input from an HD source (up to 1080i) and one for output. There are also corresponding outputs for the S-video and composite inputs, for connection to your TV. The fourth input is for a standard TV aerial for the built-in Freeview tuner.

Setting up the Slingbox Pro is simple. Connect whichever video devices you want to be able to watch remotely, such as a Sky+ box, a

PVR or even a home security camera. Bear in mind that, as there are only two infrared emitters, you'll be able to control only two out of a possible three connected set-top boxes remotely. Most devices are supported, but you can add new remote control codes if necessary.

Then you need to connect a network cable to your router. We had hoped that the new Slingbox would have built-in wireless networking, but it has the same 10/100 Ethernet port as the Classic. We assume this is because Sling Media already sells separate SlingLink Turbo kits, which use the HomePlug 1.0 standard to use your mains wiring to carry network data. Unfortunately, a pair of these costs £70.

The SlingPlayer software guides you through connecting to the Slingbox on your local network and can change your router's settings to allow remote viewing, if it supports UPnP. If not, you'll have to get your hands dirty and open the necessary port. The software has screenshots for scores of popular routers, so you can see how it's done.



SUMMARY

- ☒ Watch TV almost anywhere
- ☒ Easy to set up and use
- ☒ No wireless network

VIDEO-STREAMING DEVICE S-video, composite and component inputs, Freeview tuner, IR transmitter, 10/100 Ethernet port. Requires 256Kbit/s upload speed
PRODUCT CODE SB200-110
DETAILS <http://uk.slingmedia.com>

You're then given the chance to name your Slingbox and are presented with a Finder ID. You'll need this 34-digit code so the software can locate your Slingbox when you're connecting from the internet. If you know the IP address your ISP has assigned to you, you can use this instead to connect directly. You're unlikely to be able to access a Slingbox through a corporate firewall, so you won't be able to sit in the office and watch *Lost* from your Sky box at home.

Using the SlingPlayer is also simple. An image of the actual remote control is shown for most popular set-top boxes, so it couldn't be easier to navigate through menus to find a recorded programme or even schedule a recording. It's a slight shame that you can't pause TV from the Freeview tuner. Remember, too, that you're sharing any set-top boxes with users at home, and they won't appreciate it if you change the channel while they're watching something.

If you travel regularly or want to be able to watch your satellite or cable channels in a different room in the home, a Slingbox is a must. However, the Pro isn't cheap at £180, so it's worth hunting down a Slingbox Classic if you don't need the component input or 8Mbit/s transfer. You can find one for £100 (see below), which is a bargain.

Jim Martin

TOP UP TV TUTV Anytime DTR

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

From www.topuptv.com

This hard disk Freeview recorder has



twin tuners, so you can watch one programme while recording another. It also has a 160GB hard disk, which is enough to store over 100 hours of recordings.

As well as the usual Freeview broadcasts, you can opt to receive additional Top Up TV programming downloaded to the hard disk for £10 a month. This is certainly an inexpensive way for you to improve your TV viewing.

HARD DISK RECORDER 2x digital tuners, 160GB hard disk, RF input, RF output, 2x SCART, S-video, composite, stereo phono and coaxial S/PDIF output
DETAILS www.topuptv.com
☒ Subscription service ready; no commitment to subscribe
☒ Awkward EPG
FULL REVIEW Jul 2007

SLING MEDIA Slingbox Classic

★★★★★

£100 inc VAT

From www.currys.co.uk

The Slingbox allows you to watch



TV anywhere in the world as if you were sitting in your living room. It streams the video from your home over broadband, so you'll need an upload speed of at least 256Kbit/s. You can use it on a home network and stream TV to a PC anywhere in your house using a wireless router.

It has SCART and S-video inputs, so you can plug in whichever set-top boxes you want. It also has a built-in Freeview tuner. It even includes onscreen mock-ups of your remote controls.

VIDEO-STREAMING DEVICE SCART and S-video inputs, Freeview tuner, IR transmitter, 10/100 Ethernet port
PART CODE SB150-110
DETAILS www.slingmedia.com
☒ Works well with set-top boxes; easy to set up
☒ Can't timeshift Freeview
FULL REVIEW Sep 2006

CANON MD101

★★★★★

£149 inc VAT

From www.dabs.com

The MD101 is a great



camcorder, at an extremely low price. It has a widescreen LCD, which means that what you see on the screen is what you get on your TV.

Picture quality is excellent in good lighting conditions, with realistic colours and very little noise. Only the lack of a USB port is disappointing.

DV CAMERA MiniDV storage, 30x optical zoom, 1/4in 0.8-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, phono and composite output, FireWire interface
DETAILS www.canon.co.uk
PART CODE 1881B007AA
☒ Decent image quality; good battery life ☒ No USB port
FULL REVIEW Aug 2007

Battery life 100%
 -50% Reference +50% +100%

FREECOM Network Mediaplayer 350 WLAN

★★★★★

£81 (£185 with 500GB hard disk) inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk

This device is a hard disk enclosure, and is available empty or with a hard disk. It's also a media player with audio and video outputs to connect to your TV so you can play files from the hard disk or streamed across a home network. It's also a NAS device, so you can store files on your network.

The Mediaplayer looks stylish sitting vertically. Lying it on its side isn't an option, as the four-way menu control on the front doesn't adjust according to its orientation. A small remote control is included.

There's a DVI output for connecting to a monitor. It supports standard PC resolutions such as 1,280x1,024, but not widescreen ones such as 1,440x900. There's a component output, too, and both this and DVI support 720p and 1080i. Composite and S-video are present, but there's no SCART socket. Audio is well provided for, though, with phono stereo plus optical and coaxial S/PDIFs.

There's a 10/100 LAN port or 802.11b/g wireless for connecting to a network. It was easy to set up, and we found our server in no time. You don't need streaming software.

Just browse shared folders on your PC and select audio, video and photo files as you please. You can also plug USB devices such as digital cameras into a port on the back of the Mediaplayer and access their contents directly.

The 350 can also act as a NAS using the NDAS software, which is easy to set up. This lets you access the hard disk's



contents as if it were a local drive on your PC or notebook.

The interface has some chunky text and ugly icons. However, it's easy to navigate and responds quickly to button presses. The remote is easy to understand, with clearly labelled buttons, though its thin design makes it uncomfortable to hold.

Whether accessing files from the hard disk, a USB device or over the network, the interface is identical. You

can set up basic playlists for any type of file, it will read ID3 tags for album and artist information, and you can fast-forward or rewind through videos at up to 32x speed.

The Mediaplayer supports a wide range of file formats. These include MPEG2 with support for DVD VOB files, MPEG4 including DivX and XviD, MP3 and WMA supported for audio playback, plus JPEG, BMP and GIF support for photos. One absentee is H.264 video, which is a pity, as it's efficient and increasingly common. Video playback looked good in standard and high definition on the

formats we tested, while photos were scaled to fit our TV without creating unsightly artefacts.

Given its versatility, the Mediaplayer is a bargain. If you have an old PATA hard disk going spare, it is cheaper still. But the lack of H.264 support prevents us giving it an award.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of features
- ✓ Decent interface
- ✗ No H.264 support

HARD DISK MEDIA PLAYER PATA hard disk enclosure, USB Hi-Speed, Ethernet and 802.11b/g interfaces, DVI, component, S-video, composite, optical and coaxial S/PDIF and phono stereo outputs PART CODE 27447
DETAILS www.freecom.com

MSI Digivox mini II

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT
From www.ebuyer.com



There are lots of digital USB TV tuners available. This model from MSI caught our eye as

it comes with the same ArcSoft TotalMedia 3 software as the excellent Freecom USB Stick (see *Labs, Shopper* November 2007), yet costs just £18.

There's a full-sized RF input on the side, so

there are no fiddly adaptors to fit or lose, and the lid is held on by a piece of string. Setting up the tuner is easy. The software is similar to Microsoft's Media Center, including the provision of an easy-to-use setup wizard. This found all the expected Freeview channels, though we



had to divide up the TV and radio channels manually.

A mini remote is provided. It's fine for browsing channels and changing the volume, but it doesn't have enough buttons to let you fully navigate the interface or EPG. The EPG doesn't use a convenient timeline layout like Media Center, but shows both current programmes being

broadcast plus future broadcasts on a single channel. It is easy to read and schedule recordings.

The Digivox won't receive analogue broadcasts, but it is well designed and very cheap.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Very cheap
- ✓ Easy-to-use interface
- ✗ No timeline EPG

USB TV TUNER USB2 interface, digital tuner, RF input PART CODE DIGIVOX MINI II V3.0
DETAILS <http://msicomputer.co.uk>

CHOOSING A... TV Card

Follow the steps to find your ideal specs

INTERFACE: USB or PCI
TUNER: Digital or hybrid
INPUTS: Radio frequency (RF)
CAPTURE FORMAT: MPEG2
HARDWARE COMPRESSION: No
Recommended minimum in grey

1 TV cards connect to PCs through a variety of interfaces. Internal cards fit into PCI or PCI-E x1 slots. External devices with USB interfaces are easier to install, but use up a USB port. USB stick and PC Card versions are also available and are ideal for notebooks.

2 Most devices only tune to digital TV broadcasts, but hybrid tuners can receive analogue broadcasts as well. Terrestrial digital TV, or Freeview as it's commonly known, provides extra free channels, but you can't access subscription channels with a TV tuner card.

Analogue broadcasts can give a superior picture to digital broadcasts, but digital tuners don't suffer from noise and ghosting when reception is poor. You can check the digital reception in your area at www.freeview.co.uk. Remember that analogue broadcasts are being phased out, so analogue-only tuners are a poor choice.

3 Basic devices provide an RF input for connecting an aerial. To connect an analogue video device, such as a camcorder or VCR for video capture, look for a composite or, preferably, S-video input. Digital tuners tend not to include this feature. Buy a hybrid device if you want to receive digital TV and capture analogue video.

4 If you want to use your PC for video editing or as a digital video recorder, you'll need to capture video in an appropriate compression format. The most practical format is MPEG2, which gives excellent quality and reasonable file sizes.

Digital TV is broadcast in MPEG2 format, which makes recording to disk easy. Expect an hour of MPEG2 video to take up roughly 1.5GB of hard disk space.

5 Most TV tuners come with their own software for watching TV and scheduling recordings. Many tuners are also compatible with the excellent Windows Media Center, which is included with the Home Premium and Ultimate versions of Windows Vista.